Do You Know…

. . . that Dancing Is Visually Depicting Music ?

By Kaye West

Dancers are musicians who use their bodies to visually show the music they hear. Timing, the first characteristic to learn about a dance rhythm, relates to when to step (as if dancers themselves are creating the notes). Other characteristics deal with how the body moves **between steps** to match how the music makes the body want to move (e.g., slow and deliberate, fast and lively, flirty and playful, etc.).

In order to dance in synchronization with music, dancers must:

(1) … be able to count musical time,

(2) … be able to respond to the **downbeat**, the first beat in a measure of music (which is more pronounced than the other beats). Most round dance figures begin on count one of a measure.

(3) … realize that one "step" includes the instant the foot begins contact with the floor (which matches hearing a beat of music, since this is the only time which is discernible) PLUS the **movement** (of legs, feet, and body) **between beats** (between one sound and the next sound) when the next foot begins contact with the floor. While initial dance instruction concentrates on when and where feet are placed, skillful dancing involves what happens **during the space between changes of weight**.

(4) Men also control the facing direction, dance position, and leading techniques.

Additionally, round dancers must:

(5) … be able to complete one figure/cued pattern while listening for the next cue indicating what they will dance next. This requires multi-tasking with both sides of the brain: the left brain hears the cue, interprets it, keeps it in short-term memory until the designated time to begin it; the right-brain attends to the music while completing the current figure.

When figures are familiar, the brain relegates moving to music to long-term memory, sometimes called "muscle memory." But when figures are less familiar, they compete for some of the left-brain short-term memory processing mentioned above. This explains why dancers are able to keep time with music in easier dances and have difficulty with less familiar ones and why dancers should work on timing issues with easier routines.

In sum, there is a great deal of complex mental processing which is done in round dancing and, to truly synchronize with music, one person in the partnership must attend to the music. The woman could assume this role since males have added responsibilities and female brains are wired to readily employ both left- and right-brained tasks and male brains are not.

Counting Music

Most dance music is written in 4/4 time, meaning that there are **four beats to a measure** (or "bar," named for a vertical line on sheet music demarking one measure from the next). Waltz music is the next-most-common dance music with **three beats to a measure**.

In 4/4 time, one could count 1,2,3,4; 1,2,3,4; repeatedly at the same tempo (pace). Each numeral can be substituted with the word "quick," since by definition a step taking one beat is a Quick (Q). Four beats (sounds) in a measure produce the QQQQ pattern.

When two beats are heard in a measure (on counts "1" and "3"), they are called "Slow" (S), because by definition a Slow takes two counts, producing the SS pattern. A measure can also have three sounds yielding the familiar patterns SQQ and QQS (weight changes **beginning** on 1,-, 3, 4; and 1, 2, 3, -; respectively).

Most dancers are quite comfortable with counting the above patterns, but some are convinced that they cannot master timing patterns when one **beat** is subdivided into parts. But it truly is a familiar concept and is essential to know for skillful dancing.

Americans divide money into half-dollars or quarters; gallons into half-gallons or quarts; and inches into half inches or quarter inches. And, universally, hours are divided into quarters with an hour beginning when a chiming clock strikes the hour and with major divisions of that hour at a **quarter past**, **half past**, and a **quarter till** the next hour. Music, which measures time, uses those same divisions.

Further, musicians have names for each of the divisions to readily identify checkpoints within a measure.

The following depicts one measure divided into four beats showing the beginning and the space after it which is still part of the same count.

1	2	3	4

Each single beat can also be divided in half, and the midpoint (half-way through) is called "and" (&):

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&

Each half beat can be divided making sixteen checkpoints in each measure. Musicians name these parts: a **quarter past** is called "eeee," (e), **half past** is "and" (&), and a **quarter till** the next count is called "uh" (a).

1	e	&	a	2	e	&	a	3	e	&	a	4	e	&	a

The amount of time that is required for each of the above measures is identical. Only the counting is different. Instead of counting just whole beats, one could repeatedly count half-beats (1/&, 2/&, 3/&, 4/&;) or quarter beats (1-e/&-a; 2-e/&-a; 3-e/&-a; 4-e/&-a;). The smaller the parts, the faster the counting.

Applying Timing to Dancing

While there could be 16 discernible checkpoints instead of just four in a measure where someone could "take a picture" to know what the body is doing, dancers initially become aware of different timing patterns with just one or two divided beats in a measure. Applying knowledge of many checkpoints develops throughout an entire dancing journey for those interested.

Cha Cha has one beat divided in half, producing the pattern for one measure with five changes of weight: Q, Q, Q/&, Q;. Round dancing begins Cha Cha on beat 1; ballroom dancers generally begin counting on beat 2 (their measure remains 4 beats long; it just starts at a quarter past and goes to the next quarter past).

In Jive Chasse´ Left and Right there are six steps, or two "triples," consuming one measure of music which uses counts 1/a, 2, 3/a, 4;. In each Chasse´ the first weight change consumes three of the quarters and the "a" consumes one quarter, together making one whole; and the third weight change takes the normal four quarters. The full measure may be described as Q/a, Q, Q/a, Q;. Each of the three steps in one Chasse´ requires a different amount of time. Some instructors describe the timing pattern for one Chasse´ as "three-quarter, quarter, one" or "three-quarter, quarter, whole."

The other concept dancers must realize early on is that there are instances when something is done at the **end of the previous measure** (on count "a" of the fourth beat in 4/4 time) as a set-up for the first step (when one's foot contacts the floor on beat one) in the new measure. For example, in the New Yorker from facing partner, one swivels on the weighted foot as the body turns to step through for the first step. The figure Ronde Box has the action of moving the foot across and in front of the weighted foot before taking weight at count one.

In conclusion, learning timing can be complex. While it might seem a bit overwhelming initially, it is very logical when one understands the concepts because actions and movements must be made in a sequential manner. With practice, timing becomes natural, and it is immensely rewarding to feel at one with the music!